

## Sydney T. Chapman - **Major John André and No 22, The Circus, Bath**



Major André

Self-portrait engraved by Hopwood for 'An Authentic Narrative Of The Causes Which Led to the Death of Major André' by Joshua Hett Smith, London, 1808

In an earlier article <sup>1</sup> I recalled the life and work of the landscape artist John Taylor of Bath (1735-1806) who lived at 22 The Circus, and later in Duke Street. In 'Notes and Queries' for July 21, 1900, under the heading 'Major André's House at Bath' - though without any reference to Taylor - it was reported that a memorial tablet bearing the inscription "Here lived Major André A.D 1770" had been placed on No.22, the writer reminding readers how the 'the brave young Major Andre', had been shot by order of George Washington at New York on a charge of spying for the British government. This new tribute to his memory was duly reported in the New York Times on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1900. However, within six years the veracity of the statement was being questioned by J. F. Meehan in a short chapter 'Major André and Bath' in his 'More Famous Houses of Bath and District'. There he declared that he was going to be 'quite frank' with his readers stating that 'there is no evidence that Major André was ever in Bath' in spite of the fact that the 'mural tablet' had been placed over the entrance-door of the house stating that André had

dwelt there in 1770. He knew that there was indeed an interesting family connection with the city and house in question through André's widowed mother and three spinster sisters who 'took shelter from society' there from the later years of the eighteenth century, until 1845, nor did he rule out the possibility that John André had been in Bath before his family settled there 'almost with the sorrow of his death fresh upon them'. He thought it unjustifiable nevertheless to assert that Major André who on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1780 'fell a sacrifice to his zeal for his king and country' had actually lived at No.22. He felt there was 'a fair amount of André interest in Bath of an undoubted character' through this family connection without 'wandering in the by-path of supposition'. The idea that Major André himself was connected with the Circus was probably of long standing and had been mentioned several years earlier, again without reference to Taylor, by R. E. M. Peach in his 'Historic Houses in Bath and their Associations' (1883-4). Peach, however, perhaps simply in error, placed the André's at No.23. What is remarkable in all this is that neither author troubled himself to find out who was in ownership or occupation of the house in the year 1770 when André is stated to have lived there, or why the year 1770 was significant. Moving on a few decades, R. W. M. Wright (Director of the Victoria Art Gallery) in his notes on Bath artists observed that the rate books show Taylor living at no 22, and, in passing, that those for 1789 showed Mrs. André residing at that property. Hers is but one of several names he mentions in attempting to establish Taylor's links with the house over time; he makes no mention of Major André and perhaps he had been persuaded by Meehan that the connection was unsubstantiated. My research on Taylor has now established precisely how the house came into the possession of the André family, and, earlier, of the artist himself. Documents in the city archives show, first of all, that the residence was bought on Christmas Eve 1766 from John Brabant and Mark Davis, cabinet-makers of Bath by John Taylor and his father Abraham (BC153/562/1); Abraham Taylor formerly Colonel of the Association Regiment in Philadelphia was a friend of Benjamin Franklin and co-founder with him of the Public Academy in that city and had returned to England after making his fortune. The papers also reveal that 22 years later, John Taylor 'only son and heir of Abraham Taylor of Bath, Esquire, deceased' and Rebecca his wife sold it by a lease and release dated 23-4 November, 1788 to Mary Hannah André, Ann Margaret André and Louisa Catherine André, "all of Bath, spinsters", for the sum of £1,850 (BC153/562/4). John Taylor is now said to be 'of Grosvenor Place in the parish of Saint George, Hanover Square, Middlesex Esquire' confirming other literary and genealogical

sources which speak of the artist as ‘of the Circus, Bath and of Grosvenor Place, London’. Clearly Taylor did not sell the house for several years after the deplorable event of Major André’s execution in 1780 but it is possible that the sale of the house to the André family was no coincidence. Perhaps they, John André included, had been no less keen than many other distinguished visitors, including Royalty, to view the rooms Taylor had opened to the public and which he had decorated with many examples of his paintings as well as interesting and fine objects. Most young men of his background (he was twenty years of age in 1770) and certainly any of an ambitious and adventurous disposition would have been intrigued by Taylor’s connections with men of affairs and the arts. These included, as mentioned, Benjamin Franklin and fellow Americans Francis Hopkinson, signer of the American Declaration of Independence designer of its Great Seal and ‘star-spangled banner’ and the new nation’s first composer, and Benjamin West latterly Court painter and President of the Royal Academy; of these we know from the Franklin papers that Hopkinson stayed at 22 the Circus for a fortnight as guest of the Taylor family in 1766. It should be remembered that André was himself possessed of considerable talent as an artist and produced accomplished portraits, silhouettes, and designed fancy dresses and scenery for masques and private theatricals as Mrs. F. Nevill Jackson has described (‘Major André – Silhouettist’ in *The Connoisseur Magazine*, 1926, pp209-218) and was, as we are about to see, also connected with the world of literature. Taylor’s wider links with the arts, then, are also likely to have impressed the young André.

The date on the plaque, 1770, suggested of course that John André’s connection with No.22, if true at all, was brief; it may have been just for the season, or for a shorter period. Yet it is understandable that André’s posthumous fame would allow any interval, however short, to be deemed fit to be commemorated in this way. One has only to reflect on the plaques, fixed to buildings along his marching route, recording the stay of The Young Pretender for as little as one night. But a clue is possibly lurking elsewhere in Meehan’s own book, for he would also recall (p.85), how, according to Richard Lovell Edgeworth, a native of Bath, the young André had travelled in the very year 1770 to the west Midland town of Lichfield to see Miss Honora Sneyd. He had fallen very much in love with her, having probably been smitten by her charms the previous year when he met her there among the coterie of the poetess Anna Seward. It is not inconceivable, then, that on his journey thither or thence in that year André had detoured briefly to Bath and visited or stayed with the Taylor family. This is likely to have been recounted subsequently by one of the artist’s family; perhaps Dr. Richard Taylor, one of the artist’s sons, whose recollections of his father’s life at Bath are likely to have extended beyond the few contained in the short obituary written by (as I can now demonstrate) his friend Charles Empson of Bath on his death in 1860. One of André’s sisters, Hannah survived until her death at Taylor’s former house, aged 93, in 1845 and she or another of the long lived sisters, or indeed his brother William who was created a Baronet and lived at Bath, may have perpetuated the story linking No. 22 with Major John André. It is one thing, however, to dismiss a story due to lack of evidence and another to dismiss it with a palpably false notion like that retrospectively justifying the removal of the plaque in the 1940’s published in the Mayor’s Guide to Bath. There, as Elizabeth Holland kindly pointed out to me, it was stated that André could have not stayed at No. 22 in 1770 since the premises were in an uninhabitable state. This is hardly possible for a house less than a decade old when André is said to have stayed there. There is no evidence of a disaster befalling the building around that or any time, though it experienced a near miss in the ‘Baedeker raids’ in WWII. But until evidence linking Major André with No 22, The Circus, and particularly with the year 1770, comes to light the question of whether he visited or resided for a while at Taylor’s will still remain unresolved.



The plaque at 22 The Circus, Bath